6: Tomasic E-4 (1947-1948) 1953 RF1 Great Russia RF1
[XI century]

and hence, no group support could be found if a leader had attempted to form a centralized political authority or an imperial system over the whole area. The old Russian Chronicle of Kiev (12th century) describing a tribe with such a culture (the Polians) states that among them each kindred group (*rod*) lived in its own separate locality and had its own government.[4]

In a like manner, principles of dignity and moderation, as well as personal autonomy and lack of coerciveness, prevailed in family relations of these people. The Chronicle, for instance, states:

> The Polians had customs of their fathers, customs mild and peaceful (*krotok i tikh*); they showed a kind of reserve (*stydenie*) towards their daughters-in-law (*snokha*) and their sisters, towards their mothers and their parents, towards their fathers-in-law and their brothers-in-law; to all of the persons named they showed great reserve. They had marriage cusoms: the bridegroom did not go to seek his bride; she was taken to him in the evening, and the following morning they brought what belonged to her (*chto vdaduche*).[5]

It appears that the family organization of the Polians rested on mutual respect of all family members; that the bride brought the dowry which remained her personal property; that she might have had the initiative in wooing. This contention is supported by other evidence. Cosmas Pragensis, for instance, speaking of the old Bohemian Slavs, states: "It is not the men who choose the maids, but the maids themselves who take the husbands they like, and when they like."[6] A French writer who visited Ukraine in the seventeenth century wrote: "In Ukraine, contrary to the customs of all other nations, the husbands do not choose their wives, but are themselves chosen by their future consorts."[7]

There is also other evidence concerning some matriarchal traits of the early Slavs.[8] Throughout ages, women of the plains betwen the Dnieper and the Volga maintained property rights over their dowries and also over income from vegetables, poultry, dairy products and yarn that they produced and sold, though such rights were not recognized to men.[9] Although a woman in Russia did not have any claim to the property of her father or her brother, and only a limited right to that of her husband, she had the privilege, denied to a man, of saving and building up a

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II

[582] Perhaps as a result of family centeredness and the need of 606 keeping a distance from one's neighbor, there developed the practice of looking for the bride not in one's own but in another, more remote locality. Brides from afar, who did not have an opportunity to keep frequent contact with their own parents, were considered not only more amenable to control and easier to assimilate, but less dangerous from the point of view of the family's collective responsibility and isolation. "Do not buy a horse nor marry a daughter of your neighbor: both will run away"; "Get a wife from afar, buy a cow from near," the people would say.

[584] Very often there was nothing for a girl to look forward to in her new family. Her mate was not of her choice; he and his family were often complete strangers to her. She might not have even seen any of them before the day of her marriage. Wedding songs always refer to the bridegroom, his home, his father, and his village as "the abode of the strangers," "the unknown, far off land." As soon as the father had "stuck the hands" with the match-maker, the bride-to-be would start to lament and implore her father not to "give her away to the strangers." On the eve of the bride's marriage, her girl friends would come to her home and spend all evening singing *piesni plachevia*—"weeping songs,"[10] while the bride would cry and wail continuously. In these songs the future bride imagines herself as being left completely alone and without any affection in a distant, unknown and unfriendly world.[11]

[538] The anxieties and fears felt by the bride when going away to marry a stranger in a "strange land" might have found, perhaps, a symbolic expression in the *Zmey* tales. Zmey is a mythical being whose function is to deceive and rape young maidens and keep them forever in captivity. In the Great-Russian folk tales the Zmey is pictured as a terrifying "winged" and "many-headed" monster which throws fire from his nostrils and his mouth, but assumes the form of a youth of marvelous beauty before he abducts his victim.[12]

The prospect of the bride's relations with her husband's

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music is the minor mode. But suffering from climatic and geographical conditions has its analogues in suffering produced by other causes, and this fact sufficiently accounts for the melancholy burden of the songs of the Russians who live in the sunlight of nature's smiles. A special cause of the mournfulness of the songs of the *devitchink*, moreover lies in the circumstance that once they dealt with things which were in themselves mournful. Formerly marriage, to the maiden, meant being sold or given into involuntary servitude. She was not consulted about the match, which implied not only permanent separation from parents and friends, but also possible ill-treatment by her husband and his family against which there was no sure safeguard but death. In the *Lootschina*, sung in the first scene of "A Russian Peasant Wedding," one of the most beautiful as it also is one of the most truthfully expressive of Russian folk songs, one may hear the voice of suffering caused by the persecutions of the Russian mother-in-law. "It is sad and joyful on a quiet summer's night," says Tolstoi, "in the midst of a wordless forest, to hear the wide-sweeping song of the Russians. In it is yearning without end, without hope, also power invincible, also the fateful stamp of destiny, iron preordination, one of the fundamental principles of our nationalty with which it is possible to explain much that in Russian life seems incomprehensible. And what, besides, may not be heard in that drawling song in the summer night and the silent forest? . . . We are like the sharp arrow: it flies from the string, where the hard point pierces there is its home. . . . Clouds concealed the moon, the wind shook the tops of the linden trees, and scattered blossoms in an odorous rain on the prince and on Yelena. The old branches trembled, as if wishing to say, 'For whom do we blossom, for whom do we blow?'"

Along with the gloom of the folk-music of Russia, however, we find a boisterous humor—the humor which whirls us off our feet in the *scherzos* and *finales* of the Russian symphonists. The phenomenon is startling but not inexplicable. The most profoundly melancholy composers that have ever lived have also been the maddest ones. So under the conditions of their life the

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single, the girl is allowed some freedom; she has more time at her disposal, she can go about with her friends, attend parties, etc. When married, the cares of her new position, the necessity of harder work for her new family and her altered position amongst people who are strangers to her and who look upon her as an intruder—all these reasons keep her in the house, and her time for social recreation is past. Therefore girlhood is considered the golden time in the life of a young woman, and a girl looks with dread and apprehension upon her approaching marriage; but on the other hand, love prompts her to join her husband and she hopes that his love will compensate her for what she will have to endure. In this way there is a mixture of grief and joy in the whole ceremony.

The weddings are nearly all held in the late fall or winter, when the field work is over for the year, the harvest sold and the family knows how much money it can afford to spend. When the old people have decided that their child shall marry, they ask him or her whom he or she likes best and whom next best. Marriage, it must be remembered, is often a business matter; there must be a wedding and at the chosen period. In fact, a marriage at any other time of the year is an exception. In this way it comes about that all the marriageable girls in the village are expecting their offers to come during the same week in the fall or winter, and are ready for them.

The room is cleaned and lighted up every night, the old people and the girl stay at home, while the smaller children run about the village, looking into the windows to find out how things are going on in their neighbors' houses.

The preliminaries are usually arranged between the two families, the marriage being really more the affair of these, than of the two young people themselves, since it is in fact the giving up of a working-hand by one family and her adoption into another one. The arrangements are made by friends or go-betweens. It is customary that a female relation of the groom goes to ask for the hand of the girl, and is then called a *svakha*. With her goes some old male relation or friend, who knows all the necessary forms of ceremony and is a persuasive talker; he is

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called the *svat*. It is his business to praise up the person he represents and to obtain easy conditions. This part is sometimes taken by an old and experienced relation of the groom. 584

As there is but little time to arrange a marriage, the two *svats*, on starting out, receive the names of several families in which to enquire for brides, and therefore it is a busy week in the village—many *svats* going about from house to house. They are dressed in holiday attire, which is a sufficient sign of their mission (these visits taking place mostly in the evenings during the week). The *svat* carries with him a quart of brandy, that he may offer the necessary treat during the negotiations.

The two *svats* slowly and solemnly enter the house, where they find the girl dressed up in her best, sitting at the table with her father and mother. When a prospective bride sees them she goes away and hides. The negotiations are opened and conducted with a great deal of ceremony, as the peasants are great sticklers for propriety and the girl would be highly offended if any formality were omitted, or the wedding celebrated with a particle less pomp than the family can afford. After the first courtesies, the *svats* are asked to sit down at the head of the room by the table. They refuse, upon one pretext or another, (as being cold, etc.,) and try to get a place under the middle [777] beam of the ceiling, that being a good omen. Their attire, ceremonious behavior, etc., show plainly on what business they have come, and the actions and answers of the people of the house show them, in turn, whether or not they are welcome and what decision they may expect. Thus both sides proceed very cautiously.

The business opens with a general conversation about the weather, the price of wheat, etc. After a while the *svat* mentions casually, that he has heard the people of the house have a commodity to sell, and that he has a buyer for it, (this feature is [583] quite plainly a relic of the ancient form of marriage by purchase). If the father says there is a mistake, that he did, indeed, have a commodity, but it is sold (which means that the girl has already been promised), then the *svats* take their departure in a little while and go to the next house on the list. If an excuse is

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584 offered and they are asked to call again to-morrow they know that the girl expects another suitor whom she prefers, but that her parents wish to keep the present offer open until the other one is closed with. But if the parents like the proposed match, they ask the two *svats* to move up to the head of the room, under the holy image, and to sit down at the table, which the old lady covers with a white cloth. The old man then asks the *svats* to speak out plainly, which they do. The parents answer that they have nothing against the proposition, but that they must ask the girl. The other side also asks to see her and get her own answer. The mother then goes after her daughter and brings her in, telling her meanwhile about the offer. If she declines, that is the end of the matter. While she is away the *svat* brings out the bottle of brandy which he had brought with him and sets it on the table. The girl comes in with some bread, which she also places on the table; her father pours some brandy into a glass and sets it on a plate, together with some bread; she takes up the plate and offers the refreshments to the two *svats*, without saying a word, but naturally with a blush—as this action shows that she is in favor of the match. As a visible token she takes up a towl and ties it around the left arm of the *svat*. The latter accepts the offer with thanks, tell the father that his commodity is a very fine one, and the first part of the bargain is done.

But if the young people do not know each other well enough, as, for instance, when they belong to distant villages, it becomes necessary to arrange a meeting between them, before making any definite answer. A day is set, as soon as possible, when the *svats* are to bring the young man to the girl's house, that the young people may become acquainted. The ceremony, as described, is gone through with, and when the girl is called in again (provided, of course, that the character and standing of the young man are satisfactory to the parents), if she likes his looks, she takes a long, embroidered towel, hangs it over his shoulder and knots it. She need not say a word; if she refuses to decorate him, the affair has fallen through.

If the girl accepts the young man, the bargain is but half done: the conditions of the marriage must still be settled by the

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parents and final disagreements about trifles are not infrequent. The wedding expenses are borne by the family of the groom, and it is a point of honor with the bride and her family that the feast must be as magnificent as their means will allow. On the other hand, the bride's family has to make presents to the members of the other one, which shall be worthy of them and cost not less than the expenses of the wedding. For these reasons the *svat* and the bride's father drive a long and hard bargain concerning the articles to be furnished. The latter calls for a certain quantity of breadstuff, meat, malt, brandy, etc., which he insists the groom shall furnish. While the *svat* demands that the bride bring with her for her own use, certain articles, more or less expensive, such as bedding, wearing apparel, and also presents for the members and relatives of the other family (for instance: a new dress, of a certain price, for the mother-in-law, handkerchiefs for the aunts, etc). The two sides may become excited and disagree over a bottle of brandy or a handkerchief and even break off the negotiations. Generally the expenses of a wedding are a heavy burden to a peasant's family.

When all the conditions have been settled (always by word of mouth only), the time of the wedding is set, usually two or three weeks ahead, and then the *svats* take a ceremonious farewell. First, however, a day is agreed upon for the formal betrothal, at which both families are present and give their blessing. Only then is the engagement considered binding, and damages can be claimed for expenses and dishonor, if one side breaks the agreement.

To remind the bride's family that it is time to begin the preparation for the wedding feast, the groom sends a large cake to the house of the bride. This is done with peculiar ceremonies. Then the baking, brewing, dressmaking, etc. begins. The maidens hold nightly parties (*devitchnik*) in the houses of the bride or her friends, at which they cut and sew and fit, regaling themselves with refreshments and songs while working. To these gatherings young men are not admitted.

After the betrothal, when a relative or friend comes to the house of the bride, the latter acquaints the former of her intended

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marriage by hiding herself and wailing for the loss of her maiden freedom and for her transfer to a strange family, and if she wishes to particularly honor the guest, she will do this, not only at the first visit, but also at every one that follows. The groom does not gain any new rights by the betrothal, and does not come to the house to see his bride; the most he can do is to come to the window, bringing cakes and candy, and talk to her from the outside, in the evenings. About two nights before the wedding, the maidens have a party, at which they try on the bridal dresses, help to finish the outfit, etc., singing at the same time doleful songs; deploring her hard fate of having to leave home and go among strangers to live. On the eve of the wedding there is another party, to which the young men are admitted. The maidens take leave of their playmate, who is going to bear the cares, hard work and responsibilities of a married woman; the men agree upon the order in which they will go in the wedding procession, and arrange about the outfit of sleighs, horses, bells, ornaments, etc. Meantime, of course, refreshments are served and songs sung.

In the marriage ceremonies themselves, are to be seen remains of many ancient social customs, and we may call attention to the changes in the life of a girl which they represent:

1. The meeting bears at first the character of the usual girls' social gatherings—*possidelky*, in this way depicting her previous easy life at home, free from care.

2. Enter the *svats*, who with ceremonies, sit down on the bench under the principal beam of the ceiling. They conduct the negotiations. The bride treats them to a glass of brandy, and gives expression to her consent by tying a towel around the arm of the *svat*.

3. The bride is preparing for the wedding. The *svat* and the other male guests are driven out of the room, with noise and jokes. The hair of the bride is combed and made up for the last time, into the single, free-hanging braid of a girl. This action can be seen in the picture of Makovsky, "The Dressing of the Bride," in the Russian section of the Art Palace, at the Columbian Exposition; only the scene and time refer to a wedding amongst Boyars, about 200 years ago.

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Argument of the Play.

ACT FIRST.—THE BETROTHAL.

SCENE 1ST. The best room in the house of the bride's parents. Enter the bride, her parents and a young brother; they tidy and adorn the room; a table is set with sweetmeats, nuts and small beer (*braga*). The old people finally sit down at the table and talk to each other; the bride and her brother stand at a little distance, talking apart.

SCENE 2D. The proceedings now about to begin, are similar to the usual winter night social gatherings—*posidelky*—which are frequented by the young people of the village.

Enter the girl friends of the bride, with their spinning combs (*prialki*) their knitting and sewing; soon after them arrive the young men of the neighbourhood. The bride meets and welcomes them; the girls sit down in a circle in the middle of the room, laughing and chatting; the young men stand around them talking and joking, treat them to nuts, candy, etc. Different songs appropriate to the occasion are sung by the company, *e. g.* "The Birchwood Splinter"—*Lootchina* (No. 5)[1], "I was sitting late at night"—*Posdno Vetcherom Sidela* (No. 6)[2], etc. Suddenly there is a loud rapping, the songs cease, and everybody looks towards the door.

SCENE 3D. Enter the two *svats* (matchmakers); they bow respectfully to the parents, with a "good morning, good people," to the girls, "good mornings, beautiful girls" and to the boys. The parents bid them welcome, and ask to sit at the table; the *svats* civilly decline to do so on some pretext or other, but take their chairs and place them directly under the middle beam of the ceiling. When the girls notice this, they begin to whisper meaningly. The parents and the *svats* then proceed to discuss the match, and finally conclude the bargain; the other guests meanwhile sing an appropriate song (*Devitzy Krasavitzy*).

When the preliminary arrangements have been settled to mutual satisfaction, the mother whispers the bride, that *svats*

[1] [See cat. 116, p. 29—Analyst]
[2] [See cat. 116, p. 30—Analyst]

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from such a young man (naming him) have come to ask for her. If she likes him, she ought to answer the *svats* and treat them to something. The girl throws a towel over her shoulder, puts a glass of brandy upon a plate and brings it to the *svat*, he accepts it with thanks, but before drinking asks her what answer he shall take to young so and so. The girl blushes, but takes off the towel, and ties it around his left arm—which means her consent: the *svat* thanks her and drains his glass, while she sits down at the table and cries. The *svat* then rises, thanks the people of the house for the entertainment, and starts to leave. At this juncture, the other girls, the friends of the bride, surround him, mock and jeer him, pull him about, splash water on him, etc., at the same time singing a mocking song, "Matchmaker, you foolish matchmaker"—*svatoushka* (No. 23)[1]; this is to express their displeasure for depriving them of a companion. Finally the *svat* pacifies them by some small presents and is allowed to withdraw; the *svakha* (female matchmaker) remains behind and sends out all the men. The girls at the same time surround the bride, cover her head with a kerchief (in sign of her future dependence), commiserate her, and cry over her.

SCENE 4TH. *The Braiding of the Hair* (shown in the picture by Makovsky, "The Toilet of the Bride," in the Russian Section of the Art Palace). The *svakha* takes the bride by the hand and leads her to a chair in the middle of the room; she undoes the single braid, as worn by peasant girls, and combs it out, all the girl friends also come up one after the other and help to comb it, it is then put up again, for the *last time in her life*, into the single plait. The girls, meantime, depict in song the sorrow of separation from her family, the uncertain treatment awaiting her, etc. "A little duck"—*Outoushka* (No. 23):[2] When the bride is dressed and her hair arranged, she is led to the table where she sits down with her younger brother by her side.

SCENE 5TH. A loud noise and stomping are heard approaching, and then a loud knocking at the door. On bidding them to come in, enter the groom, *droushka* (best man), and his friends. The bridegroom takes his place at the table by the bride, the others

[1] [See cat. 116, p. 44 — Analyst]
[2] [See cat. 116, p. 46; it should be no. 27 — Analyst]